The Sayings of Old Man Tcheng

The Sayings of Old Man Tcheng

Old man Tcheng, he said:

I, old Tcheng, do not intervene to maintain, modify or change the course of things by following the desires of the individual mind. Let there be neither distrust nor revolt but only the necessary act. If I behave in a different way with you, it is so that you might, at last, by yourselves, directly see original spirit instead of always seeking it through the mediation of dead fellows or by running after scatterbrains like me.

My own manner, indeed, is to shake you like saplings in the mountain wind. Thus, I break up all your struts and props and, there you are, all undone, with nothing more to hold on to. But since I sap up all that you rely upon and, thus, you are filled with fear, you say, to reassure yourselves, that I sin against the law and convention and am but a vile blasphemer. So you go on desperately clinging to appearances and accessories instead of letting them depart from

you by themselves, without striving to hold onto them.

My words find no echo in you, so I play a trick on you and tell you they come from a great and famous fellow who has been dead for centuries. But you still do not understand that they are your direct and immediate concern. On the contrary, you seize on them as something precious, good for keeping and to cultivate. Bald-heads, by holding onto futilities, you simply waste your life away and the evidence of original spirit slips through your fingers. What a shipwreck for you!

*

Nitwits, original spirit does not appear when sleep leaves you and does not disappear when sleep comes to you. Original spirit is nothing and is totally independent of that which changes and dies.

If original spirit were truly your sole occupation, you would see all that alters and dies in the same way that you perceive the movements that dancers give to their streamers, and would resolve to constantly seek that which in you neither varies nor dies and, once you find it, then not one of the thousand worlds could divert you in your thoughts for the instant of a flash or in the slightest degree make you stray from it in your actions.

You believe you aspire to original spirit but you only actually seek the satisfaction of a condition, or learning, and of merit. Because of this, nincompoops, you are entirely under the fascination of all that in you and outside of you is not steadfast and just dies.

That is why the sayings of old Tcheng simply go through you without making an impression, like the birds which leave no trace in the sky.

Bald pates, all that you think and say concerning original spirit is but the erring and wandering of your own puny little minds. To that which nature spontaneously brings you, you respond only after interpreting it through all that you have placed on a pedestal above your heads.

Baldies, this being as artificial as the dragons made for festivals, how can you hope to see original spirit in its spontaneity?

*

In my youth, I went all round the land giving myself up to study and practices. I associated with those who had strayed and, imagining they had found the light, did nothing but cause others to stray. Then, I met him who enabled me to see all the useless mud I bore with me. The way of truth appeared to me and original spirit became my sole occupation. And, one day, everything suddenly collapsed into awareness.

I, old Tcheng, do not imitate so and so, or such and such a one. I hold to no belief, no school of thought do I follow, no one’s disciple am I. In my true nature I know nothing, I own nothing, I am nothing... for there is no old Tcheng there! In the ordinary way, the things in which I take part, of themselves, just flow by, pass away on their own. Even original spirit is no longer my concern.

The words I speak to you come not from that which is learnt.

*

Shaved skulls, I have hidden nothing from you. What profit is there for you? Nothing but stuff and nonsense!

Exit old man Tcheng

Old man Tcheng said:

Original spirit has ever been present under your very eyes. You need acquire nothing to see it because you have never lacked anything for seeing it. If you are incapable of seeing it, it is because of your unceasing chatter with yourselves and with others. You spend your time supposing, comparing, computing, developing, explaining, justifying and quoting what your puny minds have retained and thought they understood of the Scriptures and of the words of

old jackasses like me, giving preference to sayings from those to whom, after their death, was given such authority as put them beyond all doubts. In these circumstances, how can you hope to see original spirit in its instantaneousness?

Dumbells, because you are as agitated as a wagonload of monkeys and spend your time in futilities, your existence passes by like murky, muddy water. No outlet for you.

*

To say that original spirit is not sheer void, without factual existence, that is just words. In thinking about original spirit lies your poison. Giving up this thought and thinking of the absence of this thought, there, again, lies your poison. Lamebrains, you are ever seeking with your thought, and you do nothing but fabricate thoughts. Thinking that original spirit can be seen by means of thought, that is where you perish.

Burning incense, reciting sutras, spending time bowing to the ground or concentrating on staying perfectly still, fixing or eliminating thought, this is where you stray. Numskulls, you are always intervening and you do nothing but keep acting thus and so. Hoping to see original spirit by means of actions, that is your illusion.

Venerating the Buddha, that is the evil (of attachment). Rejecting the Buddha, that is the evil (of impiety). Dolts, you are ever bent on expressing emotions and you do nothing but produce sentiment. Believing one can see original spirit by means of sentiment, there is your mistake.

Dimwits, you are convinced you will come to see original spirit in this manner. But it is you and you alone that you will catch... never, do you hear, never can original spirit be found that way.

You fail to hear my words because you wish to remain deaf and you do not see original spirit because you wish to remain blind. There is no hope for you.

*

When you consider the thoughts of others as something precious and sacred, and learn, recite and transcribe them with great care and veneration in order to transmit them as a great secret, that is what I call being chained up under the thoughts.

When you cultivate the thoughts of your puny mind, looking on them as something rare, worthy of being preserved, and giving vent to a whore’s irritability if they are not respected or if in the restating of them the slightest mistake is made, that is what I call being chained up by thoughts.

When others' thoughts and your own appear to you as the waves of the sea which come and go, without any one of them being better or worse than the others and without a single one affecting you, yet you hold to the one thought of having attained a state of perfect calm, this is what I call erring above thoughts.

When no thought any longer holds your attention because evidence is born that, in regard to original spirit, there is nothing to keep and nothing to be obtained by thought, this is what I call being on the threshold of original spirit.

To be in non-time, non-place, non-form, non-movement and non-thought and to know what is perceived in the absence of any perception, this is what I call seeing original spirit.

When you have studied all the Scriptures and every treatise of every patriarch, when you have met all the awakened ones and mastered all the practices and mysterious forces, if you do not see original spirit, even if you have become summits of spirituality, of holiness and of science, your life, nincompoops, will never be other than a futile amusement.

*

Regarding the words traced on this scroll, which I have just read:

—if I tell you they are from the Buddha, you

look upon them as sacred, and you are filled with veneration and fear

—if I tell you they are from Bodhidharma or from a great patriarch, you are filled with admiration and respect

—if I tell you they are by an unknown monk, you no longer know what to think, and you are filled with doubt

—if I tell you they come from the monk in the kitchens, you burst out laughing, thinking I have just played a trick on you.

Thus, what counts for you is not the truth that these words bear but only the importance to be granted them according to the fame of the one from whom they are said to have come. You are incapable of seeing for yourselves but only feel what you think should be felt, and think according to the opinion of those you have placed on a pedestal; you are forever adding to things, tainting them, falsifying them. That is why you are powerless to see original spirit without reference to who or whatever it might be. Nincompoops, you are nothing but fakes and tricksters. Your case is hopeless.

And old man Tcheng left the room

Old man Tcheng spoke:

You have heard it said that in order to see original spirit your puny mind must be empty.

So, there you sit, rigid as a bamboo stick, looking at the wall, your tongue against your palate, striving to put a stop to your thoughts. You thus come to an absence of thoughts which you take for the vacuity or original spirit. The very next moment, the turmoil of your petty mind starts up again just as it does when you come out of sleep. In the absence of thought, what profit is there? And if a flash of light shakes you, there you go prancing like a young horse, bellowing that you have seen original spirit, that you have experienced something immense and that you were greatly privileged. What advantage is there in being struck as by thunder? All of that is a nice performance, just good enough for a circus.

Baldies, if you persist in your mania and your pretence at wanting to attain and possess whatever it might be, yours is a lost cause.

*

To see original spirit, is to see it whether thoughts are present or absent, whether one is motionless or active, whether one speaks as I am doing before you or whether one is silent, whether one is an emperor, a monk or a vagrant. What importance is there in that?

Between the Buddha and the uncouth, illiterate monk who can do nothing but chop wood but who sees original spirit, what difference is there?

There is no original spirit special to Bodhidharma and another special to old Tcheng or to each one of you. Original spirit is original spirit. Nothing else can be said about it, and even that is saying too much.

What others have said concerning original spirit and what I say of it can be of no other use to you than to incite you to directly seek it yourselves, without resorting to any authority and without artfulness. All the rest just blurs your vision and turns you away from the only question which should entirely possess you wherever you might be and whatever you might be doing: meditating, sweeping the yard or attending to the private requirements of nature. But when I see what you do with the sayings of the patriarchs and with mine, it would have been better if the patriarchs had been drowned at birth and me along with them.

Dolts, you have caught a deadly disease.

*

Shaved heads, the world and you are nothing other than thoughts of the individual mind since both disappear when sleep overtakes you. This is equally true of all the old tattery notions of your puny mind regarding the Buddha, the Way, and original spirit.

Once and for always, understand the

uselessness of all your efforts to penetrate the impenetrable by thought and action: you might as well try to capture the wind. But if you are unencumbered, entirely available to original spirit, then will you be directly seized by it.

Having heard speak of the void as being the supreme accomplishment, you seek to attain it. Thus, you fall into the torpor and insensitivity which you take for the vacuity of original spirit.

Having heard speak of the absolute as being the ultimate state, you imagine that all things are equal and that none is worthy of respect. Thus, you fall into the rakishness and anarchy which you take for the oneness of original spirit.

Having heard speak of purity as being complete happiness, you strive to attain it. Thus, you fall into a diehard attitude of rigidity which you take for the transparency of original spirit.

Having heard of detachment as being the only freedom, you try to become separate from the world and from yourselves. Thus, you fall into indifference which you take for the independence of original spirit.

Baldies, it is original spirit which is said to be vacuity, oneness, transparency and independence, and the element of the wheel of existence that you are will never be able to possess any of these faculties. But if you saw

original spirit, then you would know that it is your true nature without any possible qualification and that, in reality, no name can be given it. You would then also know that what we call void, absolute, purity, detachment, and even original spirit, are nothing but words which exist from your point of view alone, only because of your blindness and your ignorance.

Simpletons, your wanting to simulate original spirit spells the end of you.

*

Because you have become monks, followers of the law of the Buddha and disciples of a famed Master, you think you are different from the laymen on whom you look with condescension. You are as ignorant of original spirit as only the grass of the field can be.

*

You are much engrossed in getting to know who I am, from what parental stock I am issued, who were my Masters, where I have come from, what I believe, and many other things equally devoid of interest. Some think that if the Master of this abode has asked me to speak to you, I can only be an enlightened one, and others, on the contrary, that they have before them but a scandalous and insolent old fool who should be

thrown outside because he has no respect for the sayings and men of the past as revered by tradition, neither has he any respect for the sayings and men of the present exalted by their fame and renown. Thus, you hold merely to the envelope and to the appearance of things, and, because of this, you fail to perceive in you, the true man.

Fools, you put mud in your eyes and then complain of being blind.

And old man Tcheng went off with much gesticulating...

Old man Tcheng returned the next day and spoke thus:

Shaven ones, by completely abandoning yourselves to the will and whims of another whom you have exalted to the point of relying on him for all things, you imagine your attitude to be just and, thus, yourselves to be without concern and without desires. In reality, you merely behave as do very young monkeys which do not leave their mother for a single moment, desperately clinging to her, so full of fear are they. And, in course of time, you become like those dried-up trees which look like the other trees in winter but which, when spring and summer come, have no leaves and bear no fruit. In such passivity, how can you hope to see

original spirit?

Smooth pates, you are already dead.

*

Every man is enlightened by original spirit. Some see it, others ignore it, that is the only difference between them. As for you, shavenheads, you are as a drunken man, who, on the outside of an enclosure clings to the bamboo sticks, shouting that he has been shut in, that he is innocent, and implores to be set free.

Dunces, no one but you is holding each of you a prisoner. What a disaster for you!

*

Powerless to see original spirit and, thereby, to live of yourselves, you conceal your insignificance by wearing the clothing others have cast off, be they dead or alive. You accumulate viewpoints and cultivate shades of meaning, differences and convergences. Thus, you strut about. Because you dazzle fools with your tricks, you take yourselves to be enlightened men.

Nitwits, you are but chatterboxes and cheap jugglers. You have led yourselves astray. Your ill is incurable.

You need no one to see the light of the sun. All that others can say on this subject is useless

to you. You are in the light. It warms your body, and, yet, you cannot seize it and put it into a box. All attempts to possess it are doomed beforehand to failure. You can neither catch it nor get rid of it. That has already been said by this old chatterbox and by others before him.

Likewise, original spirit. It is ever present, as bright as the light of the sun. You cannot increase it nor diminish it. Dolts, if you cannot see it, this is due to the rubbish you have cluttered up in your heads. You cannot see it because you are taken over by your efforts to trap it in your thoughts, your adorations and your practices. You imagine it to be afar, and it is here. You want to grab it, and it escapes from you.

If you were entirely simple, you would only need to open your eyes to see it, just as you see the light of the sun. No need to intervene for that.

He who has seen a grain of sand has seen every grain of sand on every shore and the bed of every sea in the world. If you see original spirit, then you see all of original spirit and you are a Buddha.

I am before you as a resounding piece of wood. There is nothing deserving or important in this for there has never been a lack of, nor, till the end of men, will there ever be a lack of

beings like old Tcheng to resound in the same way.

But, nincompoops, it is to your misfortune that you are ever preoccupied with mere appearances and see here only the block of resounding wood. Because of this, original spirit finds not in you the echo which would suddenly make you realize that you are not, and have never been, other than it.

And old man Tcheng retired

The following evening old man Tcheng entered and said:

Shorn skulls, look upon all the patriarchs and all the chatterboxes like me as impostors, since they speak to you of what they can neither show you nor give you. The only usefulness one may, perhaps, grant them is that they inform us that every being has the nature of the Buddha. But it is for each one of you to seek this by himself, without being led astray by whatever else, so that you may see it in a great flash of reality. Baldies, if you let the words and magic tricks of the patriarchs affect you, then you are lost.

Nitwits, in the hope of seeing original spirit, you have accumulated much knowledge inside your little minds, just as rice is heaped up and stored. Acting thus, you have done nothing but disguise your ignorance with learned words to

discuss the true and the untrue, good and evil, the eternal and the ephemeral, heaven and earth, all the subtle and gross elements that compose man, the merits of the various ways and practices, the extent of so and so's Enlightenment, and a great many useless things, all of which shows your incapacity to find the rightful attitude.

Numskulls, your vice dwells in your arrogant pretense to want to measure the incommensurable.

If there be any among you who, while listening to me, are struck by something greater and deeper than my words and which is not the sort of sanctimonious torpor in which so many take delight, thus imagining they are at one with original spirit, but see it as a simple, clear and active light, then to these I can but indicate the true direction and show them the way. Their own muddy contour will one day break up, all at once drop off, and they will see the radiant beauty of the jewel of original spirit.

In this matter, I do not personally intervene. I am but a mode of transit for original spirit whose presence some may feel through me, old Tcheng, who am also for others as caked mud round a precious stone.

So long as I am asked about original spirit I can but remain speechless or answer: no.

As for he who sees original spirit, he has no need of old Tcheng.

*

If you were true men, your thoughts and acts would be just, and each moment appropriate to their end or object. But as you are incapable of seeing your Buddha nature, you fill up your ignorance by copying the thoughts, behaviour and acts of those you have put on a pedestal. Your preoccupation in mimicking like monkeys what others think and do, that is the cloud that stops you seeing original spirit. Dolts, you are naught but thieves and robbers. No hope for you.

Baldies, your fundamental nature in no way differs from that of the Buddha. You only lack the unambiguous knowing of it and that alone. That is what you lack and that is what impels you to seek to become what you have never stopped being. To be clearly in original spirit is the sole meaning of your existence. If you so much as slightly stray from it, you immediately fall into error and the unending swirl of causes and effects. This, alone, is what old Tcheng teaches.

And old man Tcheng left the room

Old man Tcheng declared:

Bare skulls, the thought of original spirit is but the reflection of that spirit in a particular mind,

as the image of the moon seen in the water of a pond is but a reflection of the moon. Original spirit remains present, unchanged and unaffected by the tumult of your thoughts and acts, as the moon remains unchanged and unaffected whether the water in the pond be clear or muddy, calm or agitated or whether the pond be full or empty. It is only the image of the moon which is changed or absent in such case. There is no moon in the pond.

Bald heads, you should understand that with all your inventions of purity to be attained, of detachment and freedom to be obtained, of stopping your thoughts every three hours and all the other practices you perform with a view to seizing upon original spirit, you are scooped up by your own mind like a fish in a net, you act as stupidly as if, in order to directly see the moon, you cleaned the water in the pond, took away the plants that cover it, built a bamboo fence so that the wind would not disturb the surface of the water, or as if you emptied the pond.

Dumbos, just see that you merely allow yourselves to be fettered by your own thoughts and by your pitiable actions.

*

Dunces, it is because of your blindness that old Tcheng speaks to you of original spirit and of

the individual mind as if he were referring to different things. For old Tcheng, original spirit and individual mind, the eternal and the ephemeral, wisdom and ignorance, enlightenment and blindness, nirvana, the sutras, the system of law, all the bodies of transformation and the Buddha himself are nothing but the whirlwind of thoughts, similar to a lot of dead leaves which give the impression of being alive when the winter wind lifts them but the next moment are dead again. Dolts, the true nature of beings and of things is not great for he who sees it, neither is it small for he who ignores it. It remains unaffected by being known or being unknown and by all that you thrust upon it.

You are free, shaved ones, to go on straying to perdition by way of distinctions, shades of meaning and subtleties. There, I have told all.

*

Bald heads, the Buddha first sought original spirit through the individual mind. He found this to be vanity. The Buddha then sought original spirit through disciplines and practices. There again, he saw this to be vanity. Under the Bodhi tree he still had not found original spirit, but he knew that the individual mind and action were incapable of giving him the vision of his true nature. Then, did the Buddha give up using the

individual mind and action, he accepted his ignorance and recognized his powerlessness to put a stop to it.

The Buddha was then nothing more than unknowing and waiting, affected by nothing, as still as a piece of dead wood, when, at the sight of the morning star, original spirit flooded him with light.

Such is the experience of the Buddha. Such is the example and such is the primal teaching that he has left.

But all of you, disciples of the Buddha, what have you done? You have taken possession of the Buddha to make of his life a legend over which to marvel, and to make of his person an idol for your adoration; you have seized upon the sayings of the Buddha to make of them a sacred thing worthy of being unendingly learnt, recited and transcribed. Concerning the life and the words of the Buddha, you have founded a great number of different schools, written treatises without number and never stopped chattering and blabbing. You have built temples and put up statues. You have lighted the incense and made the camphor burn. You have snuffed out beliefs and established dogmas, rules, disciplines and practices.

Nitwits, you have fallen into the trap and

seduction of all that the Buddha had recognized as being error which can only lead astray. In this manner, you built a wall as high as heaven blocking yourself from the original spirit you long to see.

Shaved skulls, if you persist in the error of your ways, what a total failure your life will be!

*

Now, baldies, listen to me with greatest attention. I will reveal to you the great secret of original spirit. This is the most important thing ever said in its regard...

Here it is: **There is no secret about original spirit.**

With a graceful pirouette, old man Tcheng disappeared and since then no one has heard speak of him.